

UNTROUBLED BY THE WAR

Lebanon's Hashish Industry

BY MICHAEL TANNENBAUM



WITH A cold, clear stream flowing through walnut and poplar trees in its center, the town of Baalbek looks innocent enough. But appearances are deceiving. After arriving here to visit an uncannily well-preserved Roman temple, I was intercepted by a young man named Ali Jaafar, who invited me to his home for coffee. I spent the next three days in the company of drug traffickers and producers.

For months foreigners have been converging on this rural backwater in the Beqaa Valley; and through hash-

ish, not archeology, its impact is being felt on the streets of Europe and North Africa. Last July, French police in St. Tropez found evidence of a planned exchange of arms for Lebanese hash. In October, West German police seized 2.3 tons of the Lebanese drug, harvested in September.

The profits involved are immense. A mellow hash than its Afghani counterpart, top quality Lebanese resin sells for about \$130 a kilo; the oil for \$1,300. Both command many times that on the European market. An Italian smuggler I met said the 20 kilos he purchased would bring in \$50,000 when sold in small amounts. His homeward journey would take him through Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Bulgaria—nations whose border guards are easily bribed.

Baksheesh works wonders in Baalbek, too. Several members of the Jaafar family (3,000 strong) told me they had little problem smoothing the way for big shipments abroad. In fact, the gendarmerie's Land Rover carries the load to port, whence a police boat transfers it to a waiting ship anchored in international waters. Still, the risks are high. According to 21-year-old Ragbeh Jaafar, most of

the vessels are nabbed before reaching their destinations, and the smugglers on board are imprisoned.

The hashish plant was introduced into the Baalbek-Hermel area just before World War II. At the time, the bulk of the harvest was shipped to surrounding Arab countries; Europe did not take a serious interest in the drug until the onset of the "youth revolution." By the early 1950s, Beirut had already launched a campaign against the growers, but the gendarmerie and the Army units sent to destroy the crop encountered stiff resistance that produced dozens of fatalities yearly. For the farmers in the valley are a cohesive bunch, comprising a formidable redoubt of 10 large families (the largest numbers 5,000) and 20 smaller ones.

And when they fight, they do not throw stones. During a cursory inspection of the town of Yamouni, dominated by the Shraif clan, I saw the finest light arms from Belgium, Germany and France. The Jaafars (related to the Shraifs through inter-

MICHAEL TANNENBAUM, a new contributor to these pages, is a freelance journalist based in Lebanon.

marriage) have artillery pieces stashed away and lament the loss of their French-built Panhard tank, seized by the Syrians.

Small wonder the government abandoned the military tack in 1965, seeking instead to encourage sunflower cultivation. The venture, aided by price subsidies, met with moderate success. By 1974, the estimated 12,500 acres devoted to hashish had been reduced to 7,500. But since the outbreak in 1975 of the Lebanese civil war—which, remarkably, has had little effect on the valley—there has been some backsliding. Sunflowers, moreover, simply can't meet local economic needs.

The Beqaa region, one of the nation's poorest, is totally lacking in industry. In many places there are no roads, not to mention paved ones, and an elementary school principal told me that of the 2,000 children who registered for classes this year, a mere 600 could be crowded into existing schoolrooms.

The Jaafar boys, by selling their own product in Europe, can escape these conditions and make a substantial living for themselves and their families. Indeed, they can afford South American cocaine as well as cars like the mustard-yellow Porsche 911 one sees tearing along country lanes bearing German license plates. Although the majority of hash farmers are not as "enterprising"—and get for their harvest what the big-time international smugglers, who buy the lion's share of the hashish here, are willing to pay—they still find hash more lucrative than sunflowers. But they would willingly give it up, several of them claimed, if offered a viable alternative.

Meanwhile, a "cancer" has entered the valley that makes the hash problem appear a mere "headcold." The imagery belongs to Dr. Malik Basbous, a top official in the Ministry of Agriculture. The cancer is opium, whose derivatives are morphine and heroin. The Beqaa farmers learned the gentle art of planting and harvesting the flowers from Turkish opium

growers via a foreign smuggler. Not much could be done to prevent the poppy's appearance, because what minimal central authority there was in this country virtually disappeared with the onset of war.

The first planting was in January 1976 and covered 75 acres, officials estimate. Its resin sold for \$1,000 per kilo. The smugglers, though, did not get their money's worth: The morphine content of the resin was disappointingly low. Consequently, the per-kilo price paid for the second harvest last June fell by over half. Hoping to up the potency of the cold-thriving flower, the Beqaa farmers have moved the crop to cooler parts of the region.



PAPAVER SOMNIFERUM

Abdulah Yazbeck, a government-employed agricultural engineer in Baalbek, reckons that 200 acres were sown with opium seeds last month. He notes that now, when cultivation remains in the experimental stage, is the time to eliminate the crop. His call has gone unheard, but for the moment there is an obstacle in the way of opium's proliferation: A large labor force—currently lacking—is needed to milk the pods during their 12-15 day gestation period. Should the Palestinians dislocated in large numbers from other sections of Lebanon move here, the labor shortage would be solved. As Dr. Basbous observes, the drug problem would also become enmeshed in one of the world's most explosive political issues.

THE BEQAA VALLEY has long been a "free zone," said one local resident with a smile. He went on to explain that this reflected the traditional weakness of a central government fearful of jolting fragile intercommunal balances. Others, responding to questions about Beirut's failure even before the civil war to control international drug smugglers, note that certain elements among the powers-that-be were and are in collusion with them—and have been known to engage in smuggling themselves.

Sabri Hamadi, for instance, an ex-Speaker of the House, now dead, was a Beqaa hash-grower. So is the family of Abdul Mawleh Ahmis, a member of Parliament. But the name that stirs the most interest in this connection is Tony Franjeh, son of the former President and Minister of Post and Telegraph during his father's tenure (today he is an MP). It is widely believed throughout Lebanon that the younger Franjeh is involved in a number of illicit businesses, hash among them; and I spoke to two people in Baalbek who claimed they have had drug dealings with his agents.

Captain Adnan Gholmieh, newly appointed head of the narcotics division in the Internal Security Forces, grudgingly admits his superiors are preventing him—ostensibly for political reasons—from doing the kind of job he knows he can do. An additional stumbling block, he maintains, is the law extending the equivalent of diplomatic immunity, including freedom from search, to members of Parliament—such as Abdul Mawleh Ahmis and Tony Franjeh.

The hashish and opium growers will probably continue to ply their trade undisturbed, therefore. Interestingly, in fact, although nearly every religious sect in Lebanon is represented in the Beqaa Valley, the fighting has passed the region by. One producer I talked to summed up the situation: "The farmers here aren't interested in who belongs to what religion. They are too busy making common cause."